The Coexistence of Old and New Worlds -

Essay based on *First Impressions of Civilization* by Charles Alexander Eastman and *Indian Education by Sherman Alexie*

The coexistence of old and new worlds is a central theme in Native American literature, reflecting the ongoing tension between indigenous traditions and dominant American culture. This conflict is clearly presented in *First Impressions of Civilization* by Charles Alexander Eastman and in Sherman Alexie's essay *Indian Education.*

While written in different historical contexts, both texts illustrate the challenges Native Americans face in balancing their ancestral traditions with the demands of Western civilization, often at the expense of their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

I chose to write about the coexistence of old and new worlds because I am fascinated by the experiences of Native Americans during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Despite being the first inhabitants of North America, Indigenous peoples were displaced, subjected to assimilation policies, and marginalized in a society dominated by European settlers. Yet, remarkably, their culture, traditions, and identity survived and continue to thrive today.

This essay explores how Native Americans navigated these challenges through the lens of Charles Alexander Eastman's *First Impressions of Civilization* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Education*, showing how both authors reflect the coexistence of traditional Indigenous life with the pressures of modern Western society.

- Charles Alexander Eastman (1858–1939) was a Sioux (Dakota) physician, writer, and activist. He grew up immersed in traditional Native culture before attending Western schools, eventually earning a medical degree and engaging with both Native and American society. Eastman's dual perspective

allowed him to document the encounter between Indigenous and Western cultures with empathy and insight.

- Sherman Alexie, born in 1966, is a poet, fiction writer, and filmmaker known for his witty and frank exploration of contemporary Native American life. He grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Hi is an author of a numerous poetry collections (I Would Steal Horses, One Sick Song), novels (Reservation Blues, Indian Killer), and story collections (The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, The Toughest Indian in the World, Ten Little Indians).

Native Americans were the original inhabitants of North America, migrating thousands of years ago across the Bering Land Bridge. They developed rich societies with complex spiritual beliefs, communal living, and strong connections to the natural world. With the arrival of European settlers, Indigenous peoples faced violent displacement, land loss, and policies designed to assimilate or eliminate them.

According to the expert guide on Native American history, the U.S. government implemented federal policies aimed at assimilation, removal, and elimination of Indigenous peoples. Assimilation was intended to replace Native cultural practices with Euro-American values, languages, and norms, often at the expense of Indigenous identity. Elimination did not only mean physical death, but also cultural and psychological destruction — the total eradication of traditional ways of life. According to the McGrath Institute (2020):

"Native Americans were expected to either remain 'uncivilized,' die out, and become extinct, or, preferably, they would become 'civilized,' thrive, and enter American society".[1]

[1] Keating, J. The assimilation, removal, and elimination of Native Americans. McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, (2020).

,,*When he was released and returned to te ne reservation upon the Missouri river, he soon became convinced that life on a government reservation meant physical and moral degradation*" as Eastman mentions in the *Indian Boyhood*[2]

Despite these efforts to remove Indigenous identity, culture survived through storytelling, spiritual practices, art, and contemporary media platforms that celebrate Native heritage.

Eastman's essay explores his initial encounters with white society and the challenge of balancing two worlds. He writes:

"The Indian was less civilized than the white man, but he was more spiritual" [3] calling, Big *Knives'' (*white nation*),a heartless nation*…to whom *the greatest object of their lives seems to be to acquire possessions''*.[4]

This statement highlights the contrast between European materialism and Indigenous spiritual values. Eastman's narrative shows how Native Americans were forced to engage with the modern world while preserving their traditions. He also emphasizes that cultural survival often depended on cooperation, adaptability, and selective assimilation. Some Native individuals shared knowledge with settlers, creating a bridge between the two worlds.

Boarding schools, as detailed in the *McGrath Institute guide*, sought to impose European cultural norms on Native children. Eastman's experiences reflect the tension inherent in these schools: while some education provided practical skills and survival tools, it also threatened to erase traditional knowledge. This duality—the coexistence of old and new—defines his work.

Alexie's essay *Indian Education* reflects his experiences growing up on the reservation and navigating both systemic prejudice and modern

---

[2] Eastman, C. A. First Impressions of Civilization, Indian Boyhood, 1902, (286)
[3] Eastman, Charles Alexander. The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation. Houghton Mifflin, 1911.
[4] Eastman, Charles Alexander. First Impression of Civilization, Indian Boyhood, 1902

schooling, making it a crucial lens through which to explore the coexistence of old and new worlds.

Alexie opens *Indian Education* with a vivid description of his hair:

“My hair was very long, and I used to pull it into a ponytail with an elastic band”[5]

Even at a young age, his appearance marks him as different, a subtle reminder of Indigenous identity. This early experience illustrates that education encompasses more than formal lessons; it includes social learning about cultural difference and marginalization.

In *Second grade*, Alexie encounters explicit prejudice not only from peers but also from teahers: “*The white kids called me names. The teachers said nothing. They thought it was funny”,(about his teacher) ,,She sent a letter home with me that told my parents to either cut my braids or keep me home from class’’ ,,Indians, Indians, Indians. She said it without capitalisation.”*[6]

This demonstrates how schooling also functions as a social space where Native children learn to navigate negative stereotyping. The educational environment teaches resilience, adaptation, and survival, showing that education extends beyond reading and writing.

Alexie returns to his hair motif in *Twelfth grade*: The hair symbolizes the tension between assimilation and cultural identity. While formal education encourages conformity, Alexie’s hair reflects his innate connection to his heritage. Similarly to Eastman, he demonstrates that Indigenous identity can coexist with Western education, though not without challenges. *“I cut my hair short, but it still grew like it wanted to be long”*[7]

---

[5] Alexie, S. Indian Education. In The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, 1998
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

The essay concludes with a *Post-script reunion*: "*We gathered, and everyone was older, and some had forgotten where we came from, but I remembered"*[8]

This section emphasizes memory, heritage, and survival. It shows that education is holistic, incorporating lessons about social dynamics, cultural identity, and personal resilience.

Both authors employ comparison and contrast to highlight tensions between Indigenous and Western worlds. Eastman compares spiritual versus material values, while Alexie contrasts his academic struggles with the effortless learning of white peers:

"They read easily; I struggled. They never worried about being laughed at; I was always afraid"[9]

These techniques emphasize systemic inequalities, cultural survival, and the coexistence of old and new worlds. Both authors show that navigating these dualities requires adaptation without total cultural surrender.

Eastman and Alexie demonstrate that the "***old world"*** of Native traditions and the "***new world"*** of Western society are not mutually exclusive. Boarding schools and formal education represent the pressures of the new world, yet both authors show that culture persists through resilience, creativity, and adaptation. Alexie's literacy and Eastman's professional engagement illustrate that embracing certain aspects of modern life does not require abandoning Indigenous heritage.

Boarding schools, intended as tools of assimilation, often backfired by reinforcing the value of heritage.

"…assimilation was elimination by other means…children suffered malnutrition in unsanitary conditions…they were forced to learn a foreign culture and fundamentally alter their identities"[10]

[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid
[10] Keating, J. The assimilation, removal, and elimination of Native Americans. McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, (2020), p. 5–6).

Yet, as Eastman and Alexie demonstrate, Indigenous peoples adapted, resisted, and preserved essential aspects of their identity. Alexie's essay in particular shows that social education—learning to survive prejudice, maintain self-respect, and honour one's heritage—is as vital as literacy or formal schooling.

,, Back home on the reservation, my former classmates graduate: a few can't read, one or two are just given attendance diplomas, most look forward to the parties. The bright students are shaken, frightened, because they don't know what comes next."[11]

The struggle between the old and the new world did not end when Native children left boarding schools or returned from American institutions. For many of them, the return to their communities proved deeply painful and disorienting. Removed from their families at a young age and taught to reject their language, customs, and beliefs, these children often came back fundamentally changed. They were no longer fully accepted within white American society, yet they also struggled to reconnect with their own communities, traditions, and sense of belonging.

This experience of living between two worlds frequently led to long-term psychological consequences. Many former boarding school students suffered from depression, substance abuse, and what is now understood as post-traumatic stress. Boarding schools placed Native children in environments "*which they could not comprehend, let alone navigate,*"[12] forcing them to abandon their identities while offering no stable alternative in return . The result was a generation of individuals caught in a state of cultural in-betweenness—belonging fully to neither world.

This sense of alienation is echoed in Native American literature. Charles Eastman reflects on the cost of Western education, suggesting that while it provided practical tools for survival, it also created an

---

[11] Alexie, S. Indian Education. In The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, 1998, p.110

[12] Keating, J. The assimilation, removal, and elimination of Native Americans. McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, (2020),

internal distance from traditional Native life to affect Indigenous lives across generations.

,,He had bought me some civilized clothing, At first, I disliked very much to wear garments made by the people I had hated so bitterly. But the thought that, after all, they had not killed my father and brothers, reconciled me, and I put on the clothes. (…)

…for now all my old ideas were to give place to new ones, and my life was to be entirely different from that of the past .

Still I was eager to see some of the wonderful inventions of the white people.[13]

In conclusion, the works of Charles Eastman's First Impressions of Civilization and Sherman Alexie's Indian Education together reveal the coexistence of old and new worlds in Native American life worlds through the lens of education, identity, and cultural survival. Boarding schools, forced assimilation, systemic prejudice, exclusion and societal stereotyping created profound challenges, yet both authors demonstrate how Indigenous peoples respond to these pressures with resilience.

These works affirm that the old world of Native traditions and the new world of contemporary American society can coexist, providing a story of endurance, negotiation, and hope for future generations.

What fascinates me most is that despite everything, Native American culture survived and continues to thrive, reminding us of its strength, individuality, and lasting presence in the modern world.

References:

1. Alexie, S. *Indian Education. In The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 1998

[13] Eastman, C, A. First Impression of Civilization, Indian Boyhood ,1902

2. Eastman, C, A. *First Impression of Civilization*, Indian Boyhood ,1902

3. Keating, J. *The assimilation, removal, and elimination of Native Americans*. McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, 2020

4. Dr Ewa Klęczaj-Siara. *Native American Literature* lecture, 2026